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SUBJECT Non-Lethal Aid for Rebels

LYNN NEERY: The picture is a little clearer today of the legislative battlelines being drawn on the question of additional American aid to the anti-Sandinista rebels fighting in Nicaragua. Yesterday President Reagan agreed to ask for only non-lethal aid. He meets with Senate leaders on Sunday to try to reach an agreement on just what kind of compromise proposal will be introduced in the Senate on Monday.

Meanwhile, today Democrats in the House unveiled their own plan.

NPR's Bill Buzenberg reports on the likely differences between the House and Senate proposals.

BILL BUZENBERG: Essentially, there are two kinds of proposals being considered. Both involve non-lethal assistance to Nicaraguan refugees or rebels. But one could step up the covert war against Nicaragua. The other seeks to phase down that war.

At the heart of the dispute is a congressional restriction prohibiting CIA activity on behalf of the rebels, known as Contras. The White House is seeking a Senate resolution that would lift that congressional restriction. If it is lifted, the CIA would again have wide latitude to help the Contras with covert assistance, using contingency funds and logistical support, as long as it notified the oversight committees of Congress.

Democrats in the House charge that such a proposal takes U.S. policy back to square one. Consequently, they've proposed an alternative that keeps in place restrictions on the CIA. And

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instead of funding \$14 million in non-lethal aid directly to the Contras, they would send \$10 million in humanitarian assistance to the Red Cross or the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, and another \$4 million to help the Contadora peace process.

The purpose of this House alternative resolution, according to one of its Republican sponsors, Ed Zschau of California, is to support a non-military approach to try to get the Sandinistas to change.

REP. ED ZSCHAU: Some have felt that the support of an insurgency, the Contras, was the right way to bring pressure. Others have felt that that's counterproductive. What this resolution tries to do is give diplomacy a chance, to emphasize the diplomatic option, but not ignore the fact that pressure may be needed.

BUZENBERG: The pressure in the House resolution is considerably less than what the White House wants. Basically, the House plan says if the Nicaraguan government improves its behavior, they may get economic aid, a carrot. If they don't improve, then the Congress will consider future requests for possible military aid, a stick.

The Democratic House alternative also keeps the CIA from engaging in military or paramilitary activity against Nicaragua, an aspect that's supported by Representative Lee Hamilton, Democratic Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

REP. LEE HAMILTON: I don't think any of us believe that the CIA is the appropriate agency for channeling humanitarian assistance. They have no particular expertise in that area. They don't claim to have. That's not what they're tasked to do, under the laws of the United States. And I think the agencies we have designated in the resolution have a vast amount of experience in dealing with the administration and delivery of humanitarian assistance.

BUZENBERG: Needless to say, White House officials don't like the House alternative. One official called it unworkable and totally unacceptable. "It's a disincentive for peace," he said, "and a green light for the Sandinistas to continue their subversion. It takes all the pressure off the Sandinistas."

The Administration maintains that Contra military pressure is needed to make the Sandinistas negotiate.

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee today, the American Ambassadors to Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras all endorsed more American aid for the Contras. If that aid or pressure is cut off, according to Harry

Bergold, U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua, it would have serious internal and external effects in Nicaragua.

AMBASSADOR HARRY BERGOLD: Internally, it would allow them to devote all or most of the resources which we have described as going to deal with the insurgency to the consolidation of the revolution at home.

Externally, it seems to me whether or not you like the Contras, they have in fact broken the offensive power of the Sandinista revolution.

BUZENBERG: In questioning the Ambassadors today, Delaware's Democratic Senator Joseph Biden took issue with what he said is a basic inconsistency in the Administration policy.

SENATOR JOSEPH BIDEN: It is inconsistent to suggest, on the one hand, absolutely we will not commit American force, and, on the other hand, to suggest that we must commit -- you've said it here today, you've implied it directly, you've stated it specifically -- we have a moral obligation to these freedom fighters.

BUZENBERG: Biden wanted to know what the next step for the United States would be if the Contras fail. Would it be U.S. troops? The Ambassadors did not provide a direct answer. They simply said U.S. policy is to support local forces, and that backing for the Contras is essential.

NOAH ADAMS: Whatever language eventually gets worked out by congressional leaders and the Reagan Administration will be voted on in Congress early next week.

NPR's Cokie Roberts has been following the legislative aspects of this Nicaraguan policy battle.

Cokie, we are hearing that President Reagan's original plan, the one he is compromising away from, still will have to be voted upon in Congress next week. I don't understand that at all.

COKIE ROBERTS: It's because the resolution that the Congress agreed to last year that put aside this \$14 million was written in such a way that it comes straight to the floor of each house without any amendments and just gets voted on straight up or down.

Now, the Senate, the Republican Senate is hoping to avoid that, and they think they might be able to get a unanimous consent. That means everybody agreeing to not going ahead and vote on the President's original plan, because they know it will be beaten, and they want to save him that embarrassment. I don't

know whether they'll be able to do that or not. But they will certainly eventually, in the Senate, vote on the compromise, whatever compromise the Republicans and the President come up with over the weekend. And there in the Senate, it is likely to eventually pass.

The House is another matter altogether, and that's where the real battle's going to be.

ADAMS: When does all of this start, all the voting, especially in the Senate?

ROBERTS: It starts in the Senate on Tuesday, and in the House the same day.

ADAMS: Now, why is that? We have heard all along the House would be alter than the Senate.

ROBERTS: Well, the House leadership has said all along that it would probably be at about the same time as the Senate. But the White House assumed that it would be about a week later and thought that they would have about a week to take the momentum from whatever victory they expected to get from the Republican Senate, take it with a lot of lobbying to the Democratic House, and then maybe be able to win in the House. So the White House has called "foul" on this.

The Speaker basically says, "Look, one of the few powers I have is scheduling. I've scheduled this vote, and that's when it's going to come.

Now, this is the way it's going to work. It's going to be very complicated in the House. First you're going to have that straight up-or-down vote on the President's proposal. And the House is determined to do that because they are determined to hand Ronald Reagan a defeat. They're eager, ready to do that, the Democratic House of Representatives. Then there'll be a vote on the Democratic alternative that Bill has just talked about. And then after that there'll be a vote on the Republican compromise. Even if the Democratic alternative passes, they'll be a vote on the Republican compromise, and it could pass too.

ADAMS: Now, why would they bother doing all that? It doesn't make sense to me.

ROBERTS: Well, you do it so that you can cast votes on all sides of an issue, but also so that everybody has a chance to win. And the way this is written is that the last one that wins, wins. And the Republicans could win this one in the House on the compromise because after they've defeated the President soundly the first time, they might want to vote with him the second time.

ADAMS: Now, after the dust settles in this voting, will that be the end of the Contra aid question for a time?

ROBERTS: Well, it depends on who wins next week. If the Republicans win in both houses, it will be the end for a time. If the Democrats win in one house, of course, it will have to go to conference. But it will not be the end forever. The Contras, like the MX and the poor, we always have with us. And there'll be another battle for the 1986 budget.

ADAMS: NPR's Cokie Roberts.